

Towards  
a  
Confession  
of the  
Common Faith

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Faith and Order Paper 100

World Council of Churches, Geneva



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## Preface

Communion in faith is at the very heart of the communion the churches are seeking to recover. How is such communion to be attained? The text published here is an attempt by theologians of different traditions to give a joint answer to this question.

In its Fourth Official Report (1975) the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches gave pride of place to the study on the unity of the Church. In the following year it decided to begin a joint reflection on "The Unity of the Church: the Goal and the Way" with a view to making further progress in the search for visible unity in one and the same faith and one and the same eucharistic community. The Joint Working Group entrusted the organization of this study to the Commission on Faith and Order, on the understanding that its results would be submitted to the Joint Working Group.

This first theme to be examined was that of unity in faith. When we talk of unity we speak of the necessity of professing the same apostolic faith; but we do not all understand this reference in the same way. A colloquium on this subject was held at Venice (12-16 June 1978) and its report was presented to the Joint Working Group when it met at Louverain (Neuchâtel, Switzerland) in February 1979. The Group asked that this text should be submitted to a number of theologians on both sides and then revised in the light of their remarks and suggestions.

The text presented in this booklet is the outcome of this process. Every effort has been made to incorporate the criticisms of fifty theologians who sent comments on the draft text. The report is now being published in the hope that it will give rise to a fruitful debate on this central theme in the quest for unity.

Clearly, in view of the agreement for which we are striving, the discussion has still to be pursued at a deeper level. The present document is a working paper which reflects the present state of this discussion. It has been drawn up by the theologians of dif-

ferent churches who set out to indicate the crucial points around which the debate now needs to be continued.

The meeting of the Faith and Order Commission at Bangalore (1978) recognized the urgency of this theme and decided to promote deeper discussion of it in the years ahead.

PIERRE DUPREY

LUKAS VISCHER

## 1. Unity in the Faith

The last decade could be judged a stage of capital importance in the common search for the unity willed by Christ. Important strides have been made in essential areas: growth in mutual understanding, respect for different traditions, common commitment to the service of the world in the name of the Gospel, concerted efforts with a view to evangelization. More important still, despite still unresolved difficulties, consensus documents regarding essential points are being worked out not only as the outcome of bilateral dialogues but even at the level of the Christian churches and communions as a whole. A case in point is the agreement prepared by the Faith and Order Commission on baptism, eucharist and ministry, of which a revised text is being prepared.

This gives ground for hope. In our present divided state, in fact, visible unity cannot be restored unless, turning towards Christ, each Church takes the decision to repent in so far as it is a community of sinful Christians. Its repentance will be genuine only to the extent to which it implies a resolve to what the complete re-establishment of communion demands of it: conversion through a constant return to the source which is Christ, a persevering effort of purification, a desire for authentic change. Such repentance will be truly constructive of unity only if it leads it to offer to others its own characteristic goods and to receive from others what it lacks itself.

Now, at the heart of such repentance is the need to reach agreement on a common profession of faith which, after centuries of mutual exclusion, will permit the churches to recognize each other as true brothers, to live in communion, and to commit themselves together to mission without any reservations. For faith is expressed in different ways: the principal ones are liturgical life, catechetical instruction, explicit proclamation of the Word, witness before the world. For to believe really implies a life lived in fidelity to Christ, the submission to his authority of one's whole existence and one's every action. This is why it is that wherever

Christians, in the name of the faith, take certain attitudes or stand together for values commended by the Gospel, such common action itself represents a confession in practice of their faith. But they must also know who it is they believe in, who is the God to whom He bears witness, what is the content of the salvation He brings. The different practical expressions of faith in Christ are all linked to and in a way governed by doctrinal expressions that translate the essential of the Christian mystery and constitute, beyond words, what is called the *regula fidei*. This represents, as it were, the understanding of the Gospel by the Church. Full ecclesial communion, then, requires that one comes to confess the faith in common in prayer, action and witness, but also in doctrinal formulas. It is with these above all that we are concerned here. Nevertheless, we shall try not to isolate them from the whole dynamic of the common search for unity. Just as a theology "in act" normally precedes the enunciation of doctrines, so communion in common commitment in the name of the faith leads to the profession of common faith. It is in doing the truth that we come to the light.

## 2. The Apostolic Faith

The essential elements of the Christian mystery are known to us through the witness of the apostolic community, transmitted in the Scriptures. These are the fruit of the Gospel and of the action of the Spirit in the primitive Church. On the one hand, they bear witness of the apostolic Church's understanding of the mystery of Christ. On the other hand, however, the truth they transmit could be fully grasped only in the context of the life of that early community faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the fellowship of the brethren, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (cf. Acts 2:42). And so we can say that we exist as Christians through the apostolic tradition (the *paradosis* of the *kerygma*), attested in Scripture and transmitted in and through the Church by the power of the Holy Spirit. Tradition thus understood is made a present reality in the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, worship, Christian instruction, theology, mission, the witness given to Christ by the life of Christians (cf. Montreal 1963, Section II, 45-46).

After the, normative, apostolic period the Church, bearer of the Spirit but engaged in history, saw itself led to make more explicit the faith it had received from the apostles. What it lived in its liturgy and bore witness to, sometimes to the point of martyrdom, it had to express in terms which would allow it to safeguard its unity and give an account of its hope. At that time it was immersed in a particular culture, permeated with the concepts of a Greek philosophy, and subject to various political situations. However, this effort to find in this new cultural and historical context an adequate expression of its faith was an essential contribution to the course of its history. In formulating the faith it enriched the Christian heritage. In fact the Spirit then led the Church to make explicit the elements necessary for its communion with the apostolic faith.

This building-period is that of the Fathers, of the creeds, of the birth of the great liturgies, of the great Councils. The conciliar

definitions about God-in-Trinity and the person of Christ Jesus, particularly, gave the Church a steady vision of the points that are at the very heart of its understanding of the Christian mystery. Certainly, in every age the Church lives and grows in the Holy Spirit and thus builds itself up in charity and faith. Moreover, since their divisions the churches have each given for themselves either conciliar decrees or confessions to which they attach a real authority. But this authority remains always subject not only to the authority of Scripture but also to that of those universally received documents which concern the centre of faith and which the Church holds from this period which was qualified to be its building-period.

### 3. The Content of the Apostolic Faith

The New Testament itself bears witness to the way in which, in different contexts and situations, the apostolic Church understood the essentials of the faith necessary for salvation. Some very short affirmations — such as “Jesus is Lord” — were made more explicit in fuller professions of faith. Thus two verses of the Epistle to the Romans put the emphasis on the event of the death and resurrection as the heart of the faith: “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (10:8-9). A text like John 3:16 insists above all on the source and purpose of the mystery of faith, that is, the love of the Father and eternal life: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but should have eternal life.” In another context, probably liturgical (Eph. 1:3-23), expression of the faith takes on such breadth as to include a synthetic reminder of the history of salvation, contain the roots of a trinitarian confession, and conclude in a vision of the Church, the Body of Christ, looking forward to its fullness.

In that apostolic period and in the subsequent building-period, cultural contexts and historical situations explain the diversity of ways in which the mystery is grasped and of the forms then taken by profession of the one faith. The profession of ecclesial faith is made in reliance on Jesus’ own promise to save those who will acknowledge him before the world (Luke 12:8-9). Its purpose is always to make entry into salvation possible for every Christian. But to this is added the need for a liturgical proclamation of the faith by the community gathered for worship. From this will derive the baptismal professions which will be, so to speak, the liturgical seal on the process of catechesis, summarizing its essential axial points. Very soon the denial of central points of faith within the community provokes, as early as the New Testament period, declarations like that in I John 4:2-3 in face of gnostic infiltrations: “Every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not con-

fess Jesus is not of God.” Peter’s preaching on the day of Pentecost is itself conditioned by the Jewish context. The classical creeds, in their turn, differ according to the circumstances in which they appeared: the apostles’ creed comes from the baptismal liturgy, while that of Nicaea (Constantinople) was composed to act as a barrier against deviations from the traditional faith. But all insist on the person and the work of Jesus. Salvation — through the remission of sins and the coming of the new world which the resurrection inaugurates — is, they say, the purpose of God’s coming in flesh. Inserted into the baptismal and then into the eucharistic liturgy, these creeds will be important for the course of tradition. They will, in fact, become the sign and the test of fidelity to the content of the apostolic faith.

The rise of heresies and the need to express the Gospel in relation to new cultures will soon oblige the churches to expound the meaning of the profession of faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour. He will be affirmed to be true God and true man, two natures united in one person. This will be the work of the great Councils. They will say of the God of faith that He is one God in three persons. The Church will further assert that from Pentecost to the parousia it has the mission of being the Spirit’s instrument to liberate humanity through the forgiveness of sins and the inauguration of the new life, above all through the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the sacraments of the Lord.

Yet the faith thus translated in the creeds and conciliar definitions is also that which is expressed, nourished and deepened in the life of the community. Formulas of faith find their meaning only as closely linked to the whole of the Christian experience. This is, moreover, why, in what we have called the building-period, there was unanimous recognition that the fidelity which seals adherence to dogmatic affirmations is professed par excellence in the eucharistic memorial, the sacrament of communion in the Body of Christ. As custodian of the good deposit of faith, the apostolic ministry has the function of guaranteeing the bond between the eucharistic celebration of each community — and so also of its faith — and that of other communities, and also of the bond between all and the apostolic community.

Ceaselessly threatened by schism, the Christian community has known tension and even divisions from its very beginning. Later on, several of these even led to fundamental divergences on how the Church sees itself as Church and how it understands its own

nature. The churches continue not to agree on what constitutes the full manifestation of God's plan through them. Some, in fact, attribute essential importance to visible elements, in particular to the sacraments, while others hold that the invisible reality of grace is the sole essential even in the time between Easter and the definitive coming of the reign of God. These divergences are, moreover, closely tied to different views of justification. Even so it must be recognized that this has not prevented the churches calling themselves bearers of the Spirit, commissioned to bring salvation to the world. Despite divisions, Christ has not withdrawn his grace, and baptism celebrated in fidelity to the apostolic tradition inserts all believers into his ecclesial Body. But the fact remains that the scandal of our division is a grave wound to God's will for his people and is one of the chief obstacles to the credibility of our witness.

## 4. The Form of a Profession of Faith Today

The ancient professions of faith and the great conciliar definitions were very often in response either to the challenges posed by tensions between the adequate expression of the faith and the new cultures, or to the internal problems of the Christian community. It was necessary to remain faithful both to the catholicity of an evangelical message destined to humanity as a whole at all times and in all environments, and to its authentic content, above all in what concerns the person of Jesus, revelation of God's saving grace. Thus the formulas of faith shed light on Christian existence by recalling to it its deepest source and meaning. At the same time they permitted each community to remain united in itself and in communion with the whole sum of Christian communities, despite temptations to division, even to schism.

Today the Church finds itself faced with analogous difficulties. They come both from the churches' new realization of a close relationship with the cultures in which they have taken root, and also from the situation of division which is ours today. So the Church needs to discover how to live the faith in such a way that it will meet the aspirations on which peoples and persons set their hopes today, and how to proclaim this faith unanimously by overcoming its divisions. In fact, these two tasks are complementary. The Church is required to proclaim the traditional faith in new ways, in response to the new conditions of humanity; but it cannot do this in a credible way unless it relies on the witness of its unity in confessing Christ. Moreover, to get out of the impasse into which confessional divisions have led it, it has need of an expression of its faith, which, at this fundamental level, will re-establish mutual confidence between the churches and clear away suspicions or reservations. For the state of disunity, reinforced by a long history of polemics, means that we are not always sure of being unanimous even on essential points, fearing lest a difference in interpretation may conceal a more profound disagreement that touches on the faith itself.

In our world the apostolic faith is challenged from all sides. This questioning touches first of all on belief in a Creator God who is leading the world to its fulfilment. Without the sense of a divine mystery, transcendent and yet present at the heart of the world with the power to reconcile it and renew it while bringing it to perfection, the Christian faith would lose its foundation. For it is this mystery of the transcendent God that makes itself present to the world through Jesus Christ in his Church. Now this truth is contested today — as much as and more than by theoretical atheism — by the very widespread practical attitude which sees the visible and finite world as the only sure reality with which humanity has to reckon. The churches therefore have to speak once again the word of faith, handed down ever since the apostolic community, which will bring light in this situation. But they must express it in a new way which will save our contemporaries from the illusion that they are emancipated from all dependence (even on God) and from the dream of attaining fulfilment through human powers alone. For the faith, which knows that a person is perfectly free only within his relationship to God, that illusion leads to the loss of true liberty. And because the Church knows that human beings are fully human only under the grace of God, it also holds that humanity's community vocation is not fully satisfied in the social and political community (with the necessary transformations) but in the Kingdom of God. Awaited in relationship to the resurrection of the dead, this is already mysteriously present under the signs of the sacramental life. Occasionally, moreover, elements from the Christian tradition, even the faith itself, are appropriated by political powers or movements of the left or of the right for goals which are radically incompatible with the spirit of the Gospel. So it is important to draw out all there is in the faith that is opposed to such cases. But simple protests or vague accusations are not enough in such cases. There is need for firm and precise expression of evangelical conviction and of what it rests on.

Other needs of the contemporary world could lead the churches to give new emphasis to aspects of the apostolic texts which in the past were not included in the explicit object of professions of faith. Confessing Christ implies today a special insistence on the connection between Christian salvation and the realization in our world of a state of justice and peace, abolishing discriminations, and thus announcing the reign of God inaugurated in Jesus. This can become a priority when there is question of defending the

dignity of the person in regions or circumstances where it is threatened. It is clear, however, that this verbal profession will be authentic only if what it expresses in words finds its practical expression in the activity of ecclesial communities to second the efforts being made everywhere in the world for the establishment of this justice and of respect for these human rights. For this is a matter of confessing the same apostolic faith, but now in its "existential" aspect without which the profession of the creeds of the past would be seriously weakened. The confession of Christ through action is, in fact, the logical outcome of adherence to the fundamental articles of faith in God the Creator and in the Incarnation "for us men and for our salvation".

It is, then, for each church not, of course, to rewrite the traditional creed, but to translate the confession of apostolic faith with a view to its own cultural context or its own historical situation. Clearly it must be careful not to push into the background that personal communion with God to which faith opens the way by reason of the mystery of Christ. For the act of faith does not stop at formulas giving intelligible expression to the mystery of God or laying down an evangelical mode of behaviour. Its goal is the very person of God, beyond any image or idea which, through revelation, we form for ourselves but always in a limited way. The apostolic texts present the faith to us as a vital dynamism by which the whole person (spirit, heart, will), recognizing in Jesus Christ his God and his Saviour, welcomes him through the Holy Spirit and in doing so yields himself to him in all that his mystery admits of and promises. For in giving himself to us He enables us, always in the Holy Spirit, to give ourselves to him also. Conversion and docility to the Spirit find their source here. And this explains the coming together of the churches in efforts to enable the new creation of which the Risen Christ is the Lord to shine forth even now.

## 5. Unity of Faith and Communion of Churches

Since the Nairobi Assembly Faith and Order has been concentrating mainly on the “conciliar community” as final result of the ecumenical quest, since this would bind the churches in an authentic communion. To bring this about there has even been talk of all the churches committing themselves in advance to preparation for a council. However, if the aim is that this should really have the ecumenical character of the first Council it is necessary that the churches taking part should first mutually recognize each other in the same faith, the same baptism and the same eucharist while admitting the equivalence of their respective ministries. For this purpose an assembly of reconciliation could be envisaged as the conclusion of the preparation on which we are already implicitly engaged. The consensus on baptism, eucharist and ministry, once it has been completed and accepted by all the churches, would be a promising step along this path.

But such a reconciliation also requires that the churches should have successfully completed their search for an authentic consensus concerning the faith with a view to the time when they will come to the point of proclaiming that faith “with one heart and one voice to the glory of God, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 15:6). In our present context, to have some impact and to serve as a firm basis for witness, the profession of faith must, in fact, be ecumenical. Certainly, to the extent to which it does not stop short at propositions to which the believing intelligence assents but attains to the transcendent reality which the words seek to express, the act of faith transcends divisions or confessional quarrels. But this does not suppress their object, nor their importance, nor the need to try to overcome them if the churches mean to respond fully to God’s plan as Jesus proclaimed it: “That all may be one so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.”

At the basis of this search should be the will to understand other churches and no longer to anathematize them, without, however,

giving up the task of discovering the objective reasons that show that this or that position held on principle by a church is opposed to the truth of the faith. The translation of the apostolic faith by a church in view of its particular situation should not, certainly not, lead to destruction of the profession of ecclesial faith. Where this translation maintains what the Church in its building-period saw as essential to its faith, the churches of other regions — especially those which have contributed to the appearance of new Christianities elsewhere than in the western world — should be ready to accept it. This recognition of the true faith under forms which are, perhaps, no longer those bequeathed to them, forms part of their conversion to the practical requirements of unity in the circumstances which will be ours henceforth. Such recognition also represents a communion in the mystery of the One who “was rich and became poor” so that the Father’s plan might be fulfilled.

There must also be readiness not to demand more than is required for a true communion that bears on what may be called the essential core of the Christian faith. By this is meant one which contains, at least implicitly, all that without which the mystery of Jesus Christ would be irremediably falsified or so impoverished that the master-conviction of the apostolic community would lose its meaning. Churches for which the content of the faith is expressed in a fuller form must not *a priori* consider other churches, whose doctrinal traditions are less explicit, as willingly or through ill-will betraying the wholeness of the Christian heritage. They must put trust in what is implicit and in the way of life it permits. In their turn, clearly, churches which are more restrained in their doctrinal affirmations and in their sacramental life must be on their guard against considering *a priori* that other churches, with richer formulas of faith and rites, are polluting the purity of faith with adventitious or parasitical additions. They should not deny, but should leave the question open. The churches have then to state precisely what in their corpus of doctrine they judge to be either a point on which they must require an explicit affirmation from other churches so that the unity God himself wishes to give to his Church may become a reality at the level of faith, or, on the contrary, to be an aspect which can remain implicit without thereby radically compromising unity of faith. Once reconciled, they will grow together towards the fullness of truth.

Diversity of doctrinal expressions is not necessarily a sign of rupture of faith. Only what is contradictory to or denies the apostolic faith should be seen as an obstacle to ecclesial commu-

nion. Moreover, unity of faith is not merely not opposed to allowing a diversity of traditions, doctrinal emphases and theological syntheses; very often it requires them. In this way are shown both the transcendence and the inexhaustible richness of the object of faith.

## Conclusion

This paper has stressed the importance of the common commitment of Christians to the evangelization of the world and to efforts to make it "the world which God wants". Here they are often already living the mystery of a communion of faith which they have not yet come to express adequately in wholly satisfactory doctrinal agreements. Already engaged as they are in a movement towards the "conciliar community", the churches can already join in a doxological proclamation of their faith, that which we find in the hymn which opens the Epistle to the Ephesians (Eph.1:3-23) even while they continue their search for doctrinal agreement. If faith is directed towards God, doxological language expresses it just as much as do the words of dogmatic creeds. This inspired text, which belongs to our common heritage and takes up the truth of faith while being free of doctrinal controversies, could become the opening blessing of our ecumenical meetings and the common profession of that faith whose demands we are trying to discern more clearly.



